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ABSTRACT

Reading teachers in Canada are concerned with a great many problems similar to those faced by their counterparts elsewhere, but they also deal with some problems which are uniquely their own. Out of its French and English history a new, distinctly Canadian, identity is emerging, and it is this identity which schools will serve. In the area of reading instruction, for example, there is a great opportunity to compare teaching reading in English to English speakers with teaching reading in French to French speakers and with the teaching of reading in the other official language to each of these groups. The number of other ethnic groups provides opportunities for teaching both official languages as second languages. Instructional and evaluational materials reflecting Canadian identity must be developed and efforts to adjust programs to individuals must be continued. In all, the challenges to reading teachers are great and varied. References are included. (MS)

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THE CHALLENGE IN CANADA

The challenge for teachers of reading in Canada, as in any country, must be considered in the context of the educational system and, in a broader sense, the culture of the nation. The background must, of necessity, be limited.

Canada is a vast country bordered by three oceans. In area, it is the third largest country in the world, but in population ranks only twenty-seventh. A unique characteristic of the population is that nearly ninety per cent of the 23 million inhabitants live within 200 miles of the United States border. The country has been generously endowed with natural resources which provide a basis for a high standard of living that is attracting people from all over the world in increasing numbers.

The multi-ethnic background of Canadians has always been an important factor in the cultural and educational development of the country. The native peoples of Canada, the Indians and Eskimos, constitute slightly more than one per cent of the population. In the past four centuries the English and French cultures have been dominant. The influence of the French in Canada has been longer than the British and, represented by over thirty per cent of the population, they are still the largest ethnic group. Combined groups with a heritage from English-speaking countries constitute forty-five per cent of the population. The remaining twenty-five per cent of the Canadian mosaic of peoples come from other European countries and Asia.

While there are two official languages in Canada, less than one-fifth

of the people are fluent in both English and French. However, bilingualism in the two official languages will become increasingly prevalent as there is a new emphasis on teaching languages from kindergarten to adult education classes. Another recent language development has been the publication of a series of Canadian English dictionaries reflecting the distinctive Canadian characteristics of pronunciations, spellings, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions in the English language. (1 and 6)

The varied backgrounds of the Canadian people provide a diversity not found in countries with more homogeneous ethnic groups. Because of this diversity, unique cultural characteristics were not easily distinguished. Now, there are increasing signs of a Canadian identity emerging; an identity which is different from unicultural societies but, nevertheless, uniquely Canadian. Independence is resulting in a new kind of nationalism, developing concurrently with increasing contributions at the international level.

Although the people represent a wide range of linguistic and cultural differences, the Canadian mood is clear - the desire for an independent identity.

Canadian Education

The diversity of Canada and Canadians is reflected again in the educational systems.

Responsibility for the organization and administration of public education has been assigned by the constitution to the provincial governments of Canada. In addition, there is no federal office of education as in Australia or United States. As a result, there is no uniform system of education or a central information office. Each of the ten provinces has its own system of education and in Quebec there is a dual system, catholic and

protestant. The federal government is responsible only for the education of certain groups, such as children of service men, Indians, and Eskimos.

The lack of uniformity in educational programmes has certain disadvantages including uneven progress across provinces. On the other hand, it contributes to the variety and the innovations which are characteristic of Canadian education. Most provincial departments of education publish curriculum guides prepared by committees involving major teacher participation. Involvement of teachers in curriculum planning, and in some cases interested parents and pupils, has resulted in greater understanding and implementation of changes than previously. A cross-country comparison of guides would indicate that there is a commonly accepted frame of reference, particularly in skill subjects, but also that within the general framework there is a stimulating amount of diversity. Numerous factors contribute to the diversity of education in contemporary Canada: historical, religious, ethnic, linguistic, and economic differences.

The use of para-professionals and parent volunteers in public education is an innovation that is providing useful adjustments in the programmes for now the teacher has extra time to spend on professional activities. Such teacher's aides may make a unique contribution for pupils with culturally different or disadvantaged backgrounds, especially when this background is quite different from the teacher's. An example of this is in the Indian schools. Few of the teachers are Indians but Indian teacher aides are alleviating the problem of communication.

The trend over the past twenty-five years to shift teacher education from normal schools and teachers' colleges to universities is continuing.

Because of a dearth of Canadian professional references, textbooks in pre-service education courses are, to a large extent, borrowed from other countries. The greatest activity in professional publications are journals and bulletins emanating from the professional associations and universities.

Where education in Canada was traditionally influenced by other cultures, educationists now strive to find relevant solutions to local problems. Stability, that was a main characteristic of education at the time of confederation, is now replaced by an emphasis on innovation a century later.

Reading Instruction

In the specific area of reading, seriously lacking is any comprehensive study or description of practices and programmes on a national basis. Concern has been expressed that

So accustomed have Canadians become to employing sources obtained from other countries, chiefly United States and Great Britain, that they seldom pause to consider what they, themselves, have produced from their own vast experience in public education. (2)

Recently, the availability of a Canadian Education Index (4) and a Canadian Bibliography of Reading and Literature Instruction (2) has demonstrated the increasing number of publications for pupils and teachers, innovations in teaching, and original research.

Traditionally, literature has been a rich source of publications indigenous to the Canadian scene and growth continues in this area. Quality is recognized by the Canadian Library Association in its annual English language and French language award for the best children's books written and published by Canadians.

Until recently, materials for instruction in reading were written and frequently published in other countries. The new feeling of nationalism was

reflected in criticisms of the appropriateness of these publications. For a period of time Canadian editions of the most frequently used textbooks were published, but such modifications were only partially successful. During the last decade many new educational authors have emerged. Most provinces provide a multiple authorization of readers and local authorities usually select basic materials of instruction from the list. The proportion of Canadian materials in use is increasing rapidly and yet materials written and published in other countries continue to be used as alternates or supplements.

An analysis of recent English-language materials for developmental reading programmes indicates a variety of emphases: basic readers with sequential skill development, integrated reading and language programmes, multi-sensory materials, and literary series. The selection of materials will, of course, be influenced by the main approach used to teach reading. Throughout the country there are areas where one approach is more prevalent than others. Generally, as teachers gain experience and advanced qualifications, they become increasingly innovative and often tend more to an eclectic approach rather than a single one. The teaching of reading in French language schools in Canada is predominately a phonics approach. In both English and French language schools the teaching of reading begins for most children at the age of six.

Instruction in reading continues to maintain a dominant role in the elementary school curriculum, but there are other noteworthy developments. The continuation of developmental reading programmes into the higher levels is increasing. Low levels of reading achievement for certain pupils has led to experimentation in methods and to innovations in diagnostic and remedial assistance. In the larger urban areas, pupils with severe learning

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disabilities usually attend child guidance clinics or learning assistance centres. Less serious problems may be attended to within the school in a remedial or corrective reading class, if the services of a reading specialist are available. In rural areas of some provinces, mobile reading clinics visit classrooms periodically providing the help of a specialist in diagnosis and planning modified programmes.

Increased concern over providing for individual differences has led to many modifications in organizing programmes. Over thirty years ago implementation of continuous progress plans was introduced. Today the range of plans is great. All have the common purpose of breaking the "lock-step" progress of pupils in the grade system so that adaptations in materials and methods of instruction will be provided for the above and below average pupils. No area of the curriculum has felt the impact of these new organizational structures more than reading, though we are far from reaching a desirable flexibility in all places.

Provision made for individual differences in the elementary school is stimulating necessary changes in the higher levels of education. On the other hand, departmentalization prevalent in urban high schools is extending down to the lower levels so that greater use may be made of the talents of the specialists than was common previously. In addition, many schools now employ a variety of forms of team teaching in open-area schools.

Accompanying increasingly flexible organizational patterns, is a greater emphasis on individualized reading than ever before. Also, concomitant with the emphasis on individualization of instruction has been the rapid development of instructional materials centres. These centres, found in the most affluent and progressive school districts, are designed to help pupils

learn how to learn. Technological advances are revolutionizing the teaching of reading still further in schools where they are experimenting with computer assisted learning, simulation, and multi-media presentations.

Specific Problems

With a cultural background as diverse as that of Canadians, there are language problems which have implications for almost every teacher of reading. In the past, citizens have been exposed to material printed in both languages on government documents, public notices, and commercial materials. This will continue, but the teaching of the second language has undergone radical changes in philosophy and pedagogy. Today, the emphasis is on an earlier introduction to the second language and a great emphasis on oral language development first, sometimes almost exclusively for three or four years. The teaching of reading in the second language has received very little attention. The four main obstacles hindering a French-Canadian pupil in learning to read English have been summarized as follows:

the ease with which he can do without that skill, if he is willing to accept the consequences; the relative inefficiency of the English program in his school; the negative transfer of his previously acquired knowledge of French phonetics; and the differences between his mother-tongue and the new language he is trying to acquire. (5)

Parallel statements could be made for the English-Canadian pupils learning to read in French.

The large influx of immigrants from Europe and Asia adds another dimension to the problem of teaching reading in the second, third, or fourth language. Special language classes are held for new Canadians when necessary. However, the rate of acquiring skill in a new language is often impeded when

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the new arrivals continue close contacts with others from their homeland. Also, the minimal language acquired in a crash programme facilitates conversation but is often insufficient for reading at a level commensurate with that in the mother tongue.

As in any country with a number of minority groups, teachers often find that many books are unsuitable for a particular group. In the case of Indian and Eskimo children, some special books have been developed for them, although much more work is needed in this area. Not only are there several languages and dialects among the native peoples but not all of these have been recorded. Making "book learning" purposeful and relevant is a challenge for authors and teachers. The problems of developing suitable materials and methods of instruction are compounded because the needs are so varied and the population of each of the culturally different groups is small.

Conclusion

As we enter the seventies, we find encouraging developments, continuing problems, and new challenges. It is difficult to reduce to general terms the scope of reading instruction in Canada for it is so varied.

The diversity of problems in Canada provides an excellent opportunity for comparative studies on the teaching of reading in English to the English speaking, teaching of reading in French to the French speaking, and the teaching of reading in the second official languages to each of these groups. Further dimensions could be added by studying the teaching of reading in either or both of the official languages to the wide range of other ethnic groups. These factors are of concern at the national level in addition to the universal problems critical in improving reading ability.

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Paramount among the challenges facing reading teachers in Canada will be the development of materials for instruction and evaluation which will reflect the emerging Canadian identity and yet provide sufficient scope for the diversity of the population. Then, continued efforts will be needed in diagnosing reading problems earlier and selecting from a range of alternatives to adjust programmes to the individual.

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